

Anti-Oppressive Education: Addressing Power and Inequality through Syllabi Redesign

Art of Teaching Seminar Series

April 4th, 2024

Dr. Melissa Iverson



UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

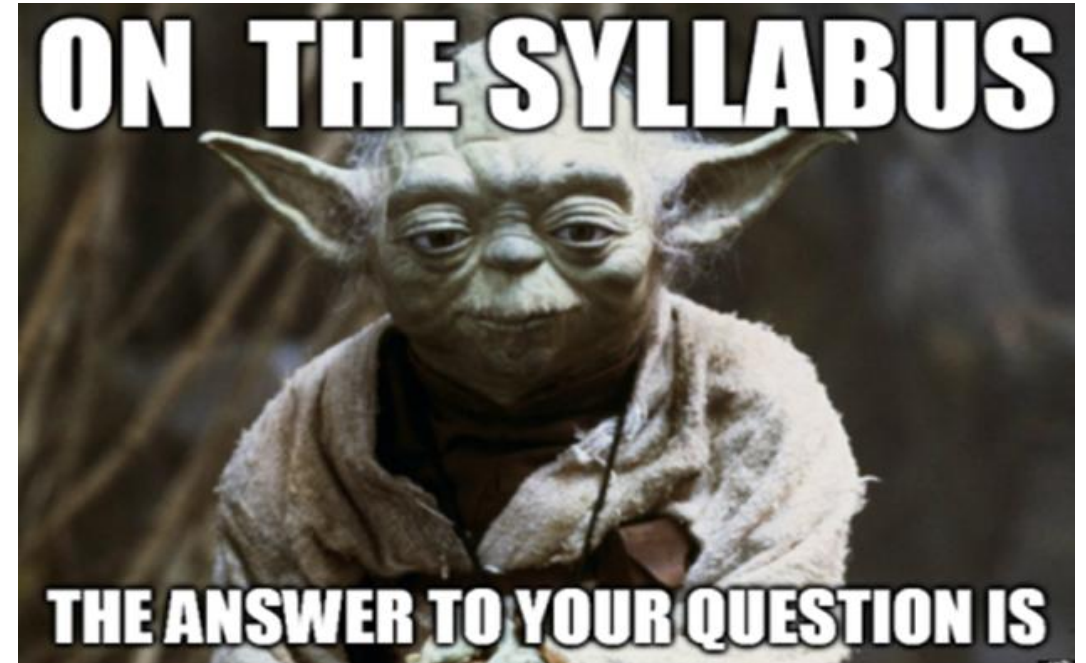
Presenter Introduction

Melissa Iverson, PhD, MSW, MA
Teaching Assistant Professor



Agenda

- 1) Syllabi purposes
- 2) Considerations for redesign
- 3) Areas for consideration
 - a) Language & tone
 - b) Power dynamics
 - c) Learning styles
- 4) Lessons learned
- 5) Student reflections
- 6) Discussion



Syllabi Purpose

- ❖ Course overview
- ❖ Learning outcomes
- ❖ Course schedule
- ❖ Assignment criteria
- ❖ Policies and expectations



Considerations for Redesign

- ❖ Changing student population
- ❖ Promoting equity and accessibility
- ❖ Fostering inclusivity
- ❖ Real-world relevance
- ❖ Critical thinking and empathy

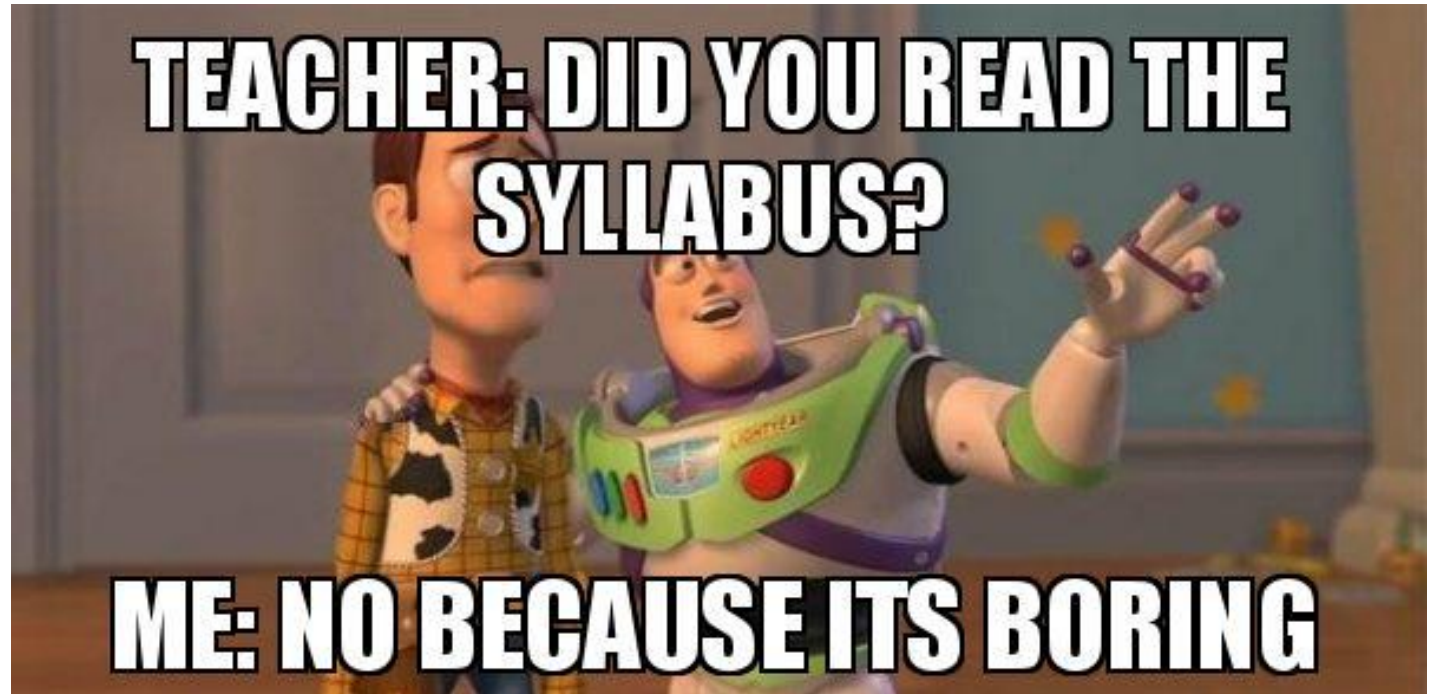
College be like

You: Hey professor how you doing today?

Professor: It's on the syllabus

Areas for Consideration

1. Language & Tone
2. Power Dynamics
3. Learning Styles



Language & Tone

- ★ Encouraging language
- ★ Non-punitive
- ★ Flexibility without negating accountability
- ★ Reevaluate standards of professionalism



Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve 

@nvancleve

I literally built into my syllabus some "rest and health" assignments for my students. NO professor ever told me that taking care of myself was part of my success and well-being. SO...I plan to teach that this first semester [@BrownUniversity](#)

Example



ORIGINAL:

Assignments are due at the start of class, as outlined by the course schedule date. Late submissions will receive a 10% **deduction** per day. Assignments are **not accepted** after 7 days.

REDESIGNED W/STUDENTS:

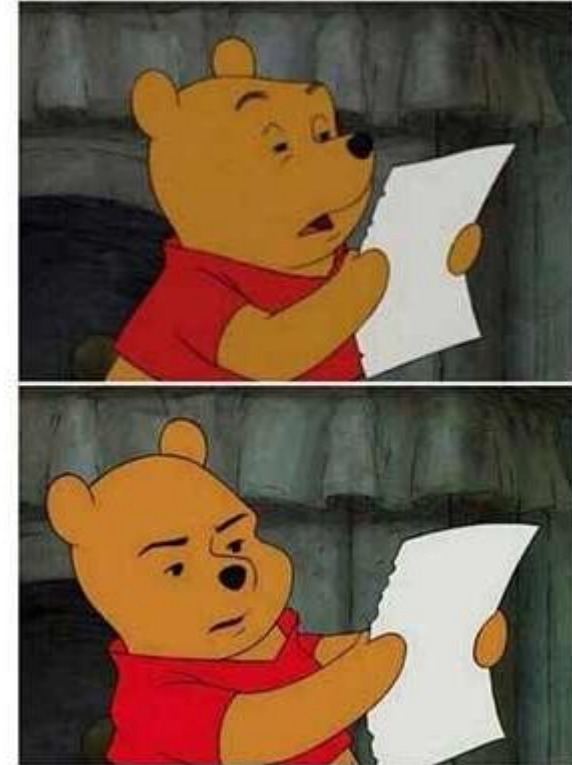
Submission Deadline: Assignments must be submitted by the beginning of class as indicated on the syllabus. A 24-hour grace period is granted for submission without any specific cause or request. Students needing an extension beyond this grace period should email the professor before the original due date to discuss a new submission deadline.

Late Submissions: Assignments submitted after the grace period, and without a prior arranged extension, are still **encouraged** to be submitted and are **eligible** to earn up to 50% of the assignment points. Assignments are **not accepted** after 7 days.

Power Dynamics

- ★ Co-creating course expectations
 - Due dates, deadlines, extensions
- ★ Be aware of power imbalances
 - Create approachable opportunities
- ★ Create connections
 - Let students get to know you
 - Lead by example

Looking at that first syllabus like



Example

ORIGINAL:

Office Hours: Fridays 8am-10am

REDESIGNED:

Student Hours: Tuesdays 2-4pm(zoom); Wednesdays 12-2(in-office or zoom) or by appointment

Each week, I set aside time to be available to students. We can meet via zoom or in person to discuss questions about course content, grades, absences, participation, etc. The link is provided on the Zoom Tab in Canvas connect via zoom. To connect in person, stop by my office.

How to read a Professor's door



Example

ORIGINAL:

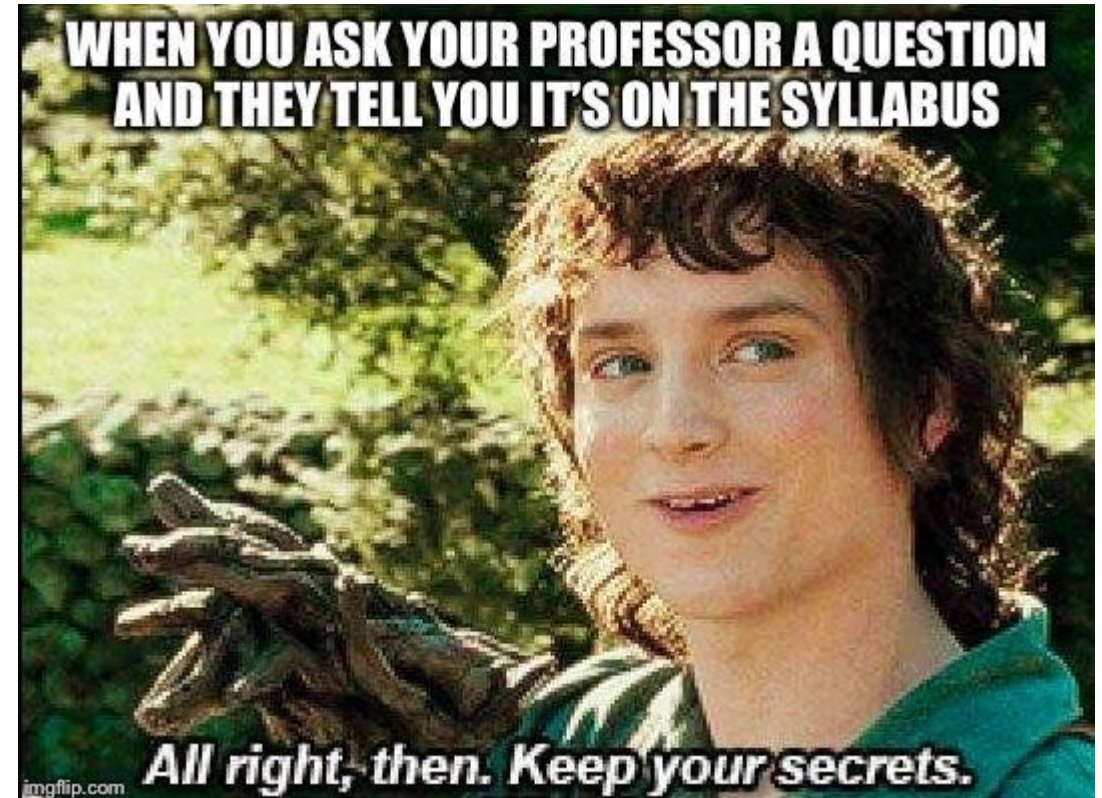
As described by the Office of the Dean of Students - Illinois **law requires** the University to **reasonably accommodate** its students' religious beliefs, observances, and practices in regard to admissions, class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and work requirements...

REDESIGNED:

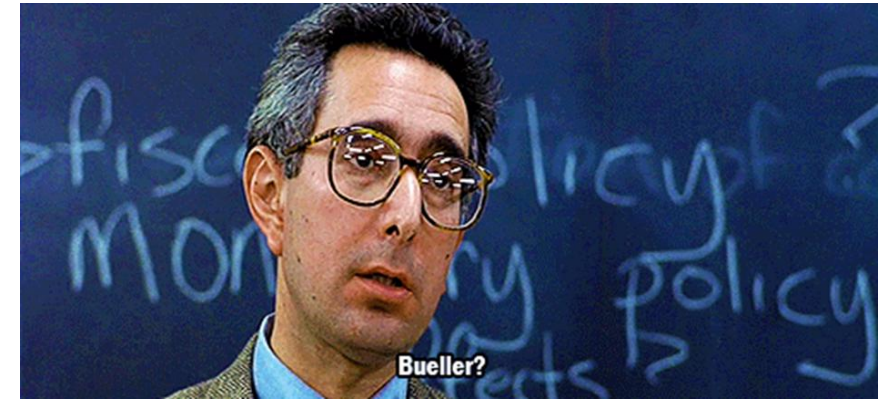
I welcome students of diverse religious backgrounds into my classroom as part of my larger commitment to inclusive educational practices. I also know that when students are able to bring all of themselves into the classroom, everyone benefits from the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds present, resulting in more robust scholarly engagement. Additionally, under Illinois law...

Learning Styles

- ★ Consider a variety of learning styles
 - Ask students what active learning looks like to them
 - Review assignments for alternatives or more options
- ★ Explore grading Schemas
 - Diversify types of grading opportunities
 - Consider holistic grading



Example in Co-creating



ORIGINAL:

Attendance & Participation Policy: Attendance is required. Each excused absence results in a 5-point deduction from the student's final score. Each unexcused absence will result in a 10-point deduction from the student's final score. To make up 5 points, submit a half-page summary of the class topics.

Co-Created Attendance Policy

REDESIGNED:

Students will work to communicate with the professor in advance (barring any extenuating circumstances) when they are unable to attend class in person or via zoom.

Students are responsible for makeup work, class materials, notes, missed activities or assignments. If the student has more than 3 excused absences, the course grade will be reduce by one letter grade. Unexcused absences will be a reduction of 5 points and are not eligible to make up in-class activities.

Assignment Variability

Questions to consider:

- ★ Is there an audio option for the paper/assignment?
- ★ Can we create flexibility in the assignment, without changing the core intentions?
- ★ Is there diversity of types of assignments to showcase different strengths



Lessons Learned

It's a balance

- Different power/privilege
- Different wants and needs

Language does matter

- Clarity
- It's still a contract
- Accountability
- Right to modify

One size doesn't fit all:

- Class size & format
- Grade level
- University policy

Shift in student relationships

- Less anxiety & fear
- Increased trust and rapport
- Peer accountability

More time and capacity

- Less, "its in the syllabus"
- Less tracking down students
- Less enforcement

Increased accountability

- Better attendance & participation
- Proactive communication
- Solutions focused

Student Reflections

“I feel more invested in the class itself. It also allows me to align my learning expectations with that of the class.”

“We're being treated like the adults that we are instead of existing in an arbitrary and unhealthy power dynamic with our professors.”

“It says nobody is better than or more important than anyone else, we all have value here.”

“Being an active participant in how the course was run and what the syllabi policies were created a safe space for creative risk-taking and mistake-making that was fertile soil for growth.”

“We discovered that we had input and choices, so we co-created a class covenant that had us holding ourselves and her to an agreed-upon rigorous standard of work, professionalism, and communication. It was weird at first, but so empowering.”

“Getting the opportunity to help influence our class climate together as a group made time spent in class feel safe, and productive.”

Final Thoughts

- It's a process!
- Consider:
 - What areas of your syllabus do you have discretion?
 - What is an immediate change you can make?
 - Can you collaborate with anyone to share revisions?



Resources

Box Folder Link:

<https://uofi.box.com/s/t9u8j9n82fgmfj3vxmssl5rkjzrz7v3q>



Contact Information

Melissa Iverson, PhD, MSW, MA
Teaching Assistant Professor

miverso@illinois.edu

www.linkedin.com/in/melissaiverson



Selected References:

- CAST. (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2019). A mind at work: Maximizing the relationship between mindset and student success. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Program in Higher Education Leadership.
- Estrada, M., Burnett, M., Campbell, A. G., Campbell, P. B., Denetclaw, W. F., Gutiérrez, C. G., ... Zavala, M. (2016). Improving underrepresented minority student persistence in STEM. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.16-01-0038>
- Gehlbach, H., Brinkworth, M. E., King, A. M., Hsu, L. M., McIntyre, J., & Rogers, T. (2016). Creating birds of similar feathers: Leveraging similarity to improve teacher-student relationships and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(3), 342-352. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000042>
- Grosland, T. J. (2019). Through laughter and through tears: emotional narratives to antiracist pedagogy. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 22(3), 301-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1468750>
- Gurung, R. A. R. & Galardi, N. R. (2021). Syllabus tone, more than mental health statements, influence intentions to seek help. *Society for the Teaching of Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628321994632>
- Hammond, Z. L. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Publishers.
- Herckis, L., Scheines, R., & Smith, J. (2017, July 12). Failure to embrace new teaching techniques is not just about fear of embarrassment. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/failure-embrace-new-teachingtechniques-not-just-about-fear-embarrassment>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2011). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis*. SAGE.
- bell, h.(1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge.
- bell, h. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge.
- Ice, P., Curtis, R., Phillips, P., & Wells, J. (2007). Using asynchronous audio feedback to enhance teaching presence and students' sense of community. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 11, 3-25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v11i2.1724>
- Kendi, I.X. (2019). *How to Be an Antiracist: Vol. First Edition*. One World.
- Ohito, E. O. (2020). Fleshing out enactments of Whiteness in antiracist pedagogy: snapshot of a White teacher educator's practice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 28(1), 17-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1585934>
- Pacansky-Brock, M. (2016, July 15). Learning out loud: Make online courses meaningful and accessible, EdSurge. Retrieved from <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2016-07-15-learning-out-loud-make-online-courses-meaningful-and-accessible>
- Pacansky-Brock, M., Smedshammer M., & Vincent-Layton, K. (2020). Humanizing online teaching to equitize higher education. *Current Issues in Education*, 21(2). <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1905>
- Picciano, A. (2002). Beyond student perceptions: Issues of interaction, presence, and performance in an online course. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 6, 21-40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v6i1.1870>